

8-1-2001

Multi-County Approach to Master Gardener Program in Rural Areas Yields Results

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Recommended Citation

Mechling, M., & Schumacher, S. (2001). Multi-County Approach to Master Gardener Program in Rural Areas Yields Results. *The Journal of Extension*, 39(4), Article 18. <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol39/iss4/18>

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August 2001 // Volume 39 // Number 4 // Ideas at Work // 4IAW3



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Multi-County Approach to Master Gardener Program in Rural Areas Yields Results

Abstract

Training and developing Master Gardeners (MG) on a multi-county basis benefited Extension personnel and clientele in an Appalachian region in Ohio. Rural clientele increasingly expect credible, research-based information on horticultural issues. Agents within an Extension district in eastern Ohio organized the first rural-based MG program in the state and developed a curriculum specific for the region. Cooperative development of MG allowed a number of counties to benefit from trained volunteers responding to horticultural questions. Since 1994, 10,000 hours of volunteer time have been documented with over 20,000 individual contacts made. The first Master Gardener of the Year in Ohio was a member of the first rural MG group.

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Training and developing Master Gardeners (MG) on a multi-county basis benefited Extension clientele and personnel in an Appalachian region in Ohio. Traditional MG programs have been implemented in suburban and urban areas of the country. In rural areas, Extension educators have clientele with horticultural questions but have generally lacked both formal training in this area and an initial critical mass of volunteers to train as Master Gardeners.

Clientele in rural areas increasingly expect to receive credible, research-based information from Extension on topics such as pest control, lawn care, gardening, composting, and plant diagnostics. Cooperative training and management of MG among a number of rural counties provided the means for volunteers to solve horticultural problems for Extension clientele.

Multi-County Master Gardener Training

Extension Agents in a very rural part of eastern Ohio initiated a multi-county approach to training and developing Master Gardeners. Agents received training in conducting an MG program from the state MG coordinator and experienced metropolitan agents. One agent coordinated the initial MG training with assistance from several other agents. The Ohio MG Manual and other county resources served as the basis for the curriculum that reflected the horticultural needs and issues of the region. Wildlife control was added as an integral part of the training.

Individual county agents were responsible for selecting volunteers as well as implementing and directing MG activities within their counties. Twenty-four volunteers from six different counties completed the initial 50-hour training session in 1994.

Some Benefits

The multi-county nature of the program was beneficial in several ways. By combining the efforts and resources of several rural counties, enough volunteers were involved to make the training

feasible. Individual rural counties would have been hard pressed to justify time and resources to conduct the MG program.

Extension agents shared teaching responsibilities and were able to specialize in one or two areas of subject matter. Agents continued to teach the same topics during subsequent training sessions. County support staff participated in MG training sessions that improved their horticultural knowledge and problem-solving skills. One agent was able to coordinate MG activities within the district, instead of several being involved with the initial administration of the program.

Volunteers from several counties enhanced the learning environment by sharing their experiences from a broader, more diverse perspective. State Extension specialists were utilized more effectively by combining interested clientele at one location.

Master Gardener advanced training sessions that include current volunteers were conducted periodically throughout the region. The locations of these sessions were rotated so that volunteers could experience different horticultural sites and attractions. By offering the MG program, rural county Extension offices used volunteers with little previous Extension experience to teach about horticultural issues in the community.

Some Results

The multi-county approach led agents to reconsider how they were conducting traditional Extension programming. These agents are now initiating programs that are offered beyond their county lines in cooperation with neighboring agents.

As interest in MG program increased in the East Extension District in Ohio, individual counties or small group of counties have developed and conducted their own programs. 10,000 hours of volunteer time have been documented in these rural counties, with over 20,000 individual contacts made. In 1999, the first Master Gardener of the Year in Ohio was a volunteer who was part of the first rural MG group trained in 1994.

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